

# NATO's New Strategic Concept and the Rise of China

**Sophia J. Kahwach**

IE University, Madrid, Spain

E-mail: [skahwach.ieu2019@student.ie.edu](mailto:skahwach.ieu2019@student.ie.edu)

Published June 8, 2023

## Abstract

Chinese foreign security strategy has evolved rapidly amid rising geopolitical tensions, yet has been promoted by static diplomatic principles and intangible policy maintained since the nearly Cold War began. Overtime, growing contradictions between the CCP's outdated, idealistic foreign policy in theory and in practice has prompted NATO to shift their attention farther Eastward and cease to recognise the nation's rise as peaceful. Though the relationship between the two actors over the past few decades has been characterised by cooperation out of common interest, key crises have fuelled its deterioration until last year, in which the relationship changed decidedly. Both actors carefully tip-toe around references to the "new Cold War", often denouncing the prospect in fear of its manifestation otherwise, whilst they continue to engage in the zero-sum game of bloc politics and exclusionary policy that characterised the original war. An ideological war of political morality, laying dormant during the global order defined by The End of History, has come to the surface after three decades, as an ideological competition of state and economic efficiency between NATO affiliated US and China-led spheres of influence. The following paper addresses the great disadvantages NATO, as a traditional military apparatus, faces within a contemporary security landscape defined by the strategic leveraging of unconventional, soft power influence.

Keywords: Chinese foreign policy, NATO, Geopolitical tensions

---

## I. Introduction

At last, NATO has positioned China within the crosshairs of priority concern on its security radar. The coercive nature of Chinese military expansion has allowed for the subtle progression of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) reach without drawing concern and criticism from the international community. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) security strategy has been successful in such coercion by virtue of the two definitive elements alluding to

Chinese self-contradiction in foreign affairs: Firstly, the exceedingly idealistic diplomatic philosophy the CCP has professed and consolidated since the Cold War era against the backdrop of a changing contemporary geopolitical landscape has grown; Secondly, the convolution of state and commercial, as well as their respective security, economic, and humanitarian initiatives throughout Xi's mandate have allowed the CCP and its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to leverage weight, especially economic and developmental, to gain political or security related

footing whilst protected by the face-value neutrality of said mandate. An argument, formerly favored by western liberal watchdogs, has gained traction within mainstream geopolitical thought as many voices throughout the developing world have consolidated a narrative of coercive diplomatic strategy featuring stories of debt-trapping, land-grabbing, non-mutually beneficial equity swaps, invasive intelligence operations and unsanctioned foreign policing stations, to the arrangement of unofficial PLA outposts to protect investments abroad. Though tensions between NATO and the CCP have been increasing for years, recent developments in the geopolitical climate have provoked the powers to coordinate decisive positions on one another. Biden's continuation of Trump administration hardline China policy, of which was contained at home vis-a-vis isolationist tendencies of the former presidency, has manifested within NATO's official position on China as a global security concern. Through multilateral engagement with NATO and enhanced international security activism amid the Russia-Ukraine war, transatlantic security solidarity has naturally been restored, prompting common points of security interest to gravitate towards policy directed at the long-term threat China is purported to pose to international security. The question is to what extent and across what sectors such a policy would be able to counter Chinese security influence abroad without coming under international criticism for breaching its bounds as a conventional military apparatus. Furthermore, will such a boundary, of which NATO is still testing its waters, be sufficient to successfully contain PLA geographic

encirclement and sectoral entanglement penetrating the global economy?

## **2. Shift in Chinese security strategy**

The CCP sets a high bar for consistent frequency in the provision of conceptual frameworks, of which outline the objectives and guiding principles behind the frequent proposals for new initiatives and diplomatic strategy. The diplomatic philosophy of 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' and its superseder "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics", typically illustrated by a framework of pillars, points, or principles, has been reiterated time and time again since departure from the Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin's strategic vision of "hide your talents, bide your time" to Xi Jinping's new direction of "get up and get on".

### *2.1 "5 principles of peaceful coexistence"*

The original text Xi has revived to underpin the new era of Chinese security strategy and expansion is the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence", proposed in response to newly gained independence of Asian states and arguably China's most noteworthy policy efforts as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement in the 20th century. The five principles constitute a universally accepted, diplomatic security framework defined by states' political resistance against foreign interference:

- 1) Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty;*
- 2) Mutual non-aggression;*
- 3) Mutual non-*

*interference in each other's internal affairs; 4) Equality and mutual benefit; 5) Peaceful coexistence.*<sup>1</sup>

A decade later, China's own "Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries", based off the preexisting five with an addition of economic-oriented provisions, enunciated by Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the People's Republic of China:

*6) Self-reliance and independent economic development; 7) No conditions or privileges; 8) Best quality interest rates and equipment*<sup>2</sup>

The CCP has readapted this conceptual framework of peaceful coexistence multiple times across a variety of sectors throughout the modernisation of its foreign policy, yet the philosophical foundation has remained near to verbatim. This framework is offered to challenge the conventional narrative of Western interventionist, ex-imperial power-led global order of international relations and is presented as such. These principles reflect the commitment to maintain security within the context of international struggles for independence throughout the Cold War, as it consolidates its former position as a third-world country engaging in diplomacy action through South-South cooperation

without association to a power bloc. This narrative has systemically indoctrinated generations of Chinese diplomats, specifically through the University of International Relations 国际关系学院 (UIR), established by the Zhou Enlai in 1949 to train party officials. Though Chinese government sources uphold the school's exclusive subordination to the Ministry of Education, researchers and journals have long contended its overt affiliation with Ministry of State Security (MSS), China's principal civilian intelligence agency, as the institution is not officially listed under the former whilst training the intelligence officers working under the ladder. Inferences can be made regarding the curricular framework of this institution and its influential impact in Chinese foreign diplomacy, as the mission Zhou Enlai set out decades ago has been regurgitated through successor diplomats, alumni of the institution, and their respective principles frameworks. The ascension of China's newest Foreign Minister, described as the "wold warrior of Chinese diplomacy", Qin Gang, to champion the philosophy of peaceful coexistence attests to Xi's interest in promoting the model more assertively abroad. Before his promotion, Qin graduated from the UIR, serving multiple

---

<sup>1</sup>China, India & Myanmar, 1954

<sup>2</sup>People's Republic of China, 1964

positions within the foreign ministry until assuming position the of Chinese Ambassador to the United States. A fundamental Xi loyalist, Qin was given the opportunity to reiterate the long-echoed philosophy provided by Zhou Enlai all those years ago to mark Xi' s new era of foreign diplomatic expansion.

### *2.2 "8 Point Diplomatic Philosophy"*

The framework's most relevant application in contemporary geopolitics and recent instrumental use to consolidate the Xi Jinping era of CCP foreign policy was outlined by Qing Gang in 2007, China's ambassador to the United States at the time, as the "8-point diplomatic philosophy of China:"<sup>3</sup>

1. China will not seek hegemony.
2. China will not play power politics and will not interfere with other countries' internal affairs. China will not impose its ideology on other countries.
3. China maintains all countries should be treated equally
4. China will not have double standards
5. China does not undermine the dignity and authority of the U.N. and does not seek to impose wishes above the U.N. Charter
6. China does not resort to use of force, or threat of force; China maintains a reasonable national

military buildup to defend its own sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is not made to expand, nor does it seek invasion or aggression.

7. China is opposed to terrorism and WMD proliferation.
8. China respects diversity and culture; China is opposed to clashes and confrontations between civilisations, and China does not link any particular ethnic group or religion with terrorism.

The decades-old security strategy's "new Cold War" adaptation is becoming increasingly relevant today, yet its rhetoric has aged to be idealistic in terms of security applications within the contemporary geopolitical landscape. This legalist fault has trapped Chinese foreign affairs within a frame of self-contradiction over the past decade of intensification of geopolitical tensions, and the Chinese professed policy principle of "peaceful coexistence" has now been rejected by the West, exactly as it was in 1956 when adopted by the Soviet Union and the subsequent failure of détente. What were perceived diplomatic victories of peaceful coexistence by the Soviet Union, such as the Helsinki act and its associated arms control agreements, only antagonised Western tension. The CCP's latest rendition of the five principles and its adaptation as a superior anti-thesis to ex-imperialist Western, democratic global order has provoked NATO in the same manner.

---

<sup>3</sup> Qin Gang, 2007

The latest prospective challenge to geopolitical status quo is presented in the recent adoption of the eight-point diplomatic philosophy to underpin the simultaneous promotion of global security and development frameworks. There is no fundamental problem with the use of these principles to underpin security and economic development initiatives separately; however, China's manipulation of the universally accepted, loose-ended principle framework to engulf and entangle the interests of both policy frameworks whilst professed as a China-style alternative to global order should be checked for its hypocrisy.

### *2.3 The entanglement of the GDI and the GSI (April 2022)*

On April 21 of last year, Xi Jinping proposed the new "Global Security Initiative" and "Global Development Initiative" at the Boao Forum for Asia's annual conference in China. The proposal was vague, repeating the principles of peaceful co-existence as per usual, and offered no innovative insight into their promotion of security. Can China's universally accepted, borderless framework of interstate relations be viewed as a valid response to NATO and US-led security initiatives? Xi's announcement of joint implementation for the GSI and GDI was based upon his outlook at the "new Cold War" geopolitical landscape:

*"Cold War mentality would only reck the global peace framework, that hegemonism and power politics would only endanger world peace, and that bloc confrontation would only exacerbate security challenges in the 21st Century"*<sup>4</sup>

This motive is baseless within the context of a new Cold War, as China's foreign statecraft of an aligned front behind the very principle of non-alignment and abstinence to bloc politics is unimpressive. Yet, its multifaceted fluidity is what will make confronting the invasiveness of its policy fundamentally challenging for collective NATO security countermeasures. China, having expressed the sentiment of being on the receiving end of unfair treatment under geopolitical order defined by Western influence, is able to advance using its assumed role of 'active defense'. Having arrived late to the global race for national militarisation, China expands its military capabilities in a non-threatening manner, as it is subjected to a game of "catch-up". China pursues equalisation through "weishi" or 'an encirclement game', of which is apparent regarding the allocation of its bi-lateral interdependence abroad.

The active defense role is what will characterise China's attitude and policy toward NATO, yet within an obscure plane of jurisdictionalism featuring defense of non-conventional threats to security. China's testing of NATO's self-perceived boundaries in which it can act strategically as a military alliance is manifest in its contended pretexts to establish foreign military presence: the military protection of its foreign investments.

### **3. Contextualising Sino-NATO relations**

---

<sup>4</sup> Xi Jinping, Boao Forum 2022

Passive, gradual deterioration of NATO-China state of affairs post Cold War and settlement into the new Cold War context. The new Cold War is defined as the successor to the ideological conflict between a US-led bloc of Western liberal democracies practicing market capitalism and the Soviet-led bloc of politically totalitarian nations practicing economic central planning and social egalitarianism. The traditional Cold War has proved the USSR state model inferior, though the outcome usually interpreted as an ideological win was largely determined by an economic loss. A tension characterised by the significance of morality and ideas behind the ideological state model has lost its punch, rather it has evolved to become a competition of model efficiency. The Chinese remediation of authoritarian governance to integrate market capitalism, operating complementary to state governance, proves the Chinese state model to have significantly greater potential as a challenger to the hegemony of the current Western-liberal model today. Key geopolitical events related to the relationship between the two powers, of which pinned the two diplomatic philosophies against each other, marked critical points of degradation within the long-perceived diplomatic partnership.

Crises often cited in search for historical sources of tension between NATO and China encompass NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Serbia (1999), NATO's intervention in Libya (2011), Donald Trump's election to Presidential office (2017); however, throughout these events, China maintained a generally indifferent outlook toward the military alliance based on constructive

cooperation toward common military interests, such as anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. This changed in 2022, with the announcement of NATO's New Strategic Concept and China's U-turn in attitude toward the organization. The past two decades have provided for productive diplomatic relations between China and NATO, given the two entities shared common security interests for a long period of time, over a wide array of operations: counterterrorism, counter-piracy operations, crisis management, and stabilizing operations. The partnership, encouraged by the previous engagement policy towards China, was contingent upon NATO's perception of the state's 'peaceful rise'. Conversely, Chinese indifference to the alliance based upon its perception of the entity as a relic of the Cold War encouraged a passive cooperation. The Russia-Ukraine tensions have breathed new air into these perceptions, as NATO has been brought into the strategic forefront for its conventional purpose once again.

The strategic challenge NATO presents to China is not produced by its prospect for geographic enlargement, as the country is situated relatively far from Europe, rather, it is the expansion of NATO activities beyond conventional security initiatives into the sphere of space, cyber, and humanitarian interventions. This functional enlargement would boast more of a challenge to China, as it prevents its penetration into Western economies, in consideration of competition in access to technology and the paranoia of a Chinese trade monopoly via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The tenet of an increasingly globalised society,

specific to “new Cold War” contexts, renders this geographical difference obsolete in global competition defined by soft power challenges. NATO’s mandate has been updated to accommodate this new reality, yet China has deemed its scope threatening and has strictly warned against the “ganging up” of NATO aligned countries, as a *China Daily* article explains the CCP’s take on the NATO foreign policy response :

*if you are a hammer, all you see is nails*<sup>5</sup>

Though, Beijing has made a point of distinguishing Europe and its respective security interests from those of the US. The difference between U.S. security interests of burden sharing and European interests of power sharing have been emphasised within CCP rhetoric, describing the alliance as unequal and unstandardised. Wedges based on these fundamental difference are expected to be driven through alliance, though outlook on the group’s unity looks promising under the new concept for collective security strategy. NATO members, with significant addition of its Asian-Pacific partners, have established an Indo-Pacific platform in which a general consensus on China was able to be met across North American, European, and Asian partners. Europe supports the US perspective of Chinese foreign security policy as fundamentally incompatible to the liberal post-WWII order at the basis of transatlantic relations. Europe’s own impression of Chinese global presence to disproportionately serve China’s interests, as it

accrues its influence at the expense of libertarian values of free market-economy and democracy, has fallen in-line with US interests. With a long-term outlook, European nations should take advantage of the hard-stance the US has taken, as the crossroads between EU economic and geostrategic security, at its port cities, is threatened by Chinese influence. Chinese SOEs have been successful thus far in the irreversible penetration and interdependence with European economy, most evident in its state-backed ownership of at least 10% of the total of European ports. This is a leverage China has economically and geostrategically, as they have previously been criticised for the docking of naval ships in commercially leased ports abroad, is extended from: the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, but most importantly, European NATO member-state Germany.

In response to recent controversy over Chinese shipping company, Costco’s, bid to invest in Hamburg port emphasised the nation’s reliance their number trade partner, China, amid Russia-Ukraine insights into the risk of interdependency with increasingly assertive, authoritarian states. Bruno Kahl, the head of Germany’s foreign intelligence service (BND) defended the necessity to review Chinese investment across all sectors of critical infrastructure, stating:

*Germany should expect China to use technology, including 5G infrastructure, or economic power to implement its*

---

<sup>5</sup> *China Daily*, 2022

*ideas ... In the case of political disagreement between China and Germany, these instruments will be used*<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Haldenwang, the head of Germany's domestic intelligence service references the strategic leveraging of economic interdependency to serve Chinese state and security interests.

*When I speak with foreign partners about China, they always say: Russia is the storm, China is climate-change*<sup>7</sup>

NATO has directly referred to the strategic leveraging of investments abroad to outcompete western industry. This becomes a security concern as China collects strategic assets abroad, with special attention to harbours and runways.

#### **4. Sino-anxiety**

Sino-anxiety is increasing among NATO members and has in turn, provoked tensions with the CCP — NATO declares China a security challenge for the first time and China has responded. The US has the policy habit of reading Chinese threats to national security in terms of hard power confrontation and détente, of which is a persistent threat in Beijing's view, as it will largely influence NATO's approach to their newest designation as a security challenge.

#### **4.1 Madrid NATO Summit 2022 (June 29)**

NATO is enhancing security cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners in order to enhance the possibility of coordinated responses to multifaceted methods of coercive Chinese diplomacy, with particular attention directed at the South China Sea. A ground-breaking new outlook toward China was announced at the Madrid NATO Summit of June 2022, as NATO officials cited the PRC as a security threat for the first time whilst opening new levels of engagement to Asian Alliance partners for the purpose of coordinated military deterrence of expansionary threats in the Indo-Pacific. Point 13 of NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept states:

*The People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interest, security, and values. The PRC employs a broad range of political economic and military tools to increase its global footprint and project power, while remaining opaque about its strategy. The PRC's malicious hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation target Allies and harm Alliance security. The PRC seeks to control key key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, and strategic materials and supply chains. It uses economic leverage to create strategic dependencies and enhance its influence. It strives to subvert the rules-based international order, including in the space, cyber and maritime domains.*<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Head of BND Bruno Kahl, 2022

<sup>7</sup> Chief of Domestic Intelligence Thomas Haldenwang, 2022

<sup>8</sup> NATO 2022 Strategic Concept



*4.2 Chinese FM Zhao Lijian's Press Conference (June 30)*

The CCP understands the New Strategic Concept has provoked Cold War tensions by forcing Asia-Pacific countries to choose sides between the US and China by virtue of great power geopolitical competition.

*The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept has misrepresented facts and distorted the truth. In this document, NATO once again wrongly defined China as posing "systemic challenges..."*

*The document seeks to stoke confrontation and antagonism and smacks heavily of Cold War mentality and ideological bias...*

*In contrast, it is NATO that poses systemic challenges to world security and stability...*

*Now NATO has extended its tentacles to the Asia-Pacific and sought to export the Cold War mentality and replicate bloc confrontation...<sup>9</sup>*

The competition of state models that defines the new Cold War, as the US tries further decouples itself with China, establish exclusive arms control agreements and military alliances, and offer alternatives to Chinese infrastructure projects, has been largely perceived as a US resumption of the containment policy of the original Cold War.

China is concerned with the globalisation of NATO's conceptual enlargement, as it is trying to export its own. As it is a military alliance, NATO's 2022 strategic concept puts

heavy emphasis on deterrence mechanisms, an element not entertained in Chinese conceptual frameworks. China argues the very nature of NATO doctrine will contribute to the proliferation of military conflict globally, and one region is of specific concern.

Without delving in too deep into Russia role in recent geopolitical game theory, it can be said that China has taken away a lesson from NATO's encroachment on Russian security within Europe, Xi consolidated the Moscow purported narrative blaming the Russia-Ukraine conflict on NATO's expansionary, antagonistic behavior, as provided by a joint statement issued by the powers in February 2022. This encroachment has been applied to the context of Indo-Pacific security and, in China's view, will characterise the alliance's approach to engagement in the region. This view was supported by NATO's reference to the security threat posed by Sino-Russia relations:

*The deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based International; order run counter to our values and interests.*

<sup>10</sup>

As a response to NATO's new strategic concept, President XI announced the 2022 Global Security Initiative (GSI). Largely interpreted as a "repackaging" of principles of peaceful coexistence, the GSI includes one additional feature: The Russian principle of indivisible security,

---

<sup>9</sup> FM Zhao Lijian, Regular Press Conference 2022

<sup>10</sup> NATO 2022 Strategic Concept

originally incorporated into Chinese foreign policy during the Trump administration, is provided as a direct response to NATO's behavior towards Russia and the 2022 new strategic concept. The indivisible security crafted between Chinese and Russia powers sees NATO behavior towards Russia as a reflection of future US-led NATO behaviour towards China in the Indo-Pacific. The CCP expects NATO to implement their doctrine within non-military security areas, in response to the dynamic nature of China's security policy, within Indo-Pacific, and even the Arctic circle. The principle of indivisible security, however, is completely contradictory to the principles of peaceful co-existence the Chinese government has professed since the Cold War. The CCP's adaptation of indivisible security policy, of which fundamentally based upon judgement toward conventional, western-led security policies, is essentially antithetical. Like any other country acting in its national security interests, it will not constrain its security expansion with the idealistic principles of non-aligned Cold War mentality. If enhanced militarisation proliferates within the Indo-Pacific resulting in the use of force, with respect to Taiwan, China has stated it will take all necessary measures to defend its interests.

#### *4.3 US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken meets FM Wang Yi (July 2022)*

Wang urges the US not to seek a new Cold War and to refrain from targeting its alliances with China and pursuing

the independence of Taiwan while citing the US-fueled Sino-anxiety influencing NATO's new strategic direction:

*Many people believe that the United States is suffering from an increasingly serious bout of 'Sinophobia'<sup>11</sup>*

Correctly stated, Washington is crippled with Sino-anxiety: a fear rooted in the unknown, by which the coercive, nontransparent nature of Chinese military expansionism has caused NATO countries to put its guard up. The uncertain method of expansionism implies an unsure method of containment or deterrence, prompting NATO to act much more defensively towards its Chinese counterpart than its foreign affairs may warrant. The argument for NATO's exaggeratory behavior would be more convincing had China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) not been exported abroad across unofficial outposts for years prior to the release of the 2022 Strategic Concept. American panic has spread to European countries.

### **5. NATO late to the "new Cold War"**

The American Sino-anxiety has taken foot in Europe, but perhaps too far a step behind China? Why has the China word just now surfaced after such a long period of western watchful suspicion? The trigger in this case is the hard power threat familiar to the NATO military apparatus, a threat recognisable to them of which is setting off the used alarm bells of the Cold War Era the previous NATO

---

<sup>11</sup> FM Wang Yi, 2022

mandate was directed toward not so long ago. NATO and its allies are concerned about the recent, rapid and deviantly opaque manner in which China's PLA is building up and, most importantly, its cooperation with Russia amid current geopolitical conflict. As the PLA has become more conversion, the unofficial military presence China occupies, exclusive from its only official outpost in Djibouti, has become more apparent. Sanctioned, yet off-radar, military outposts have typically been established to secure the economic investments and corridors with partnered neighbouring countries, though military presence for the security of ports, such as the Chinese-leased Gwadar port of Pakistan, has agitated the Sino-panic to spread across European, port-dependent cities. China has not been confronted yet, despite sentiments shared within NATO that have reflected a long history of amassed criticism, simply because NATO had lacked an angle for approach. The organisation's role in the international community as a strategic military alliance does not allow for international acceptance of its engagement with threats to international security of which are multi-faceted and sector pluralistic as the nature of China's security strategy and leverage over its allied partners rather than conventional concerns of hard power deterrence. The 2022 Strategic Concept has made an effort to remediate this, by expanding the area and actors with which it can operate. Understandings of the two thematically contradictory, yet similarly conceptual, frameworks will transform once observed in policy practice. How far will NATO and China

be able to stretch their policy to fit the framework, and where does Brussels and Beijing go from here? Where does China go from here?

## 6. The red line behind the one-China policy

One of the more concerning developments in Chinese bilateral relations with its allies, considering the element of bloc confrontation that both NATO and Chinese security doctrines predispose, is the exportation of the one-China policy. Marked as a "red line" for US-Sino relations within a new Cold War context during the bi-lateral Xi-Biden Meeting ahead of the G20 Summit in Bali last year, the CCP's subsequent press statement provided:

*[Xi Jinping] stressed that the Taiwan question is at the very core of China's interests, the bedrock of the political foundation of China-U.S. relations, and the first red line that must not be crossed in China-U.S. relations.<sup>12</sup>*

Deviance in rhetoric suggestive to "new Cold War" interpretations between the English and Chinese CCP published press statements, such as:

*democracy versus authoritarianism (English version)*

*democratic confrontation to authority (Chinese version)*

and

---

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2022

*competition... is not about taking other down in a zero sum-game (English version)*

*competition... is not if you lose I win and you die (Chinese version)<sup>13</sup>*

Aside from the clear use of decisively antagonistic rhetoric in the Chinese version, the use of “red line” idiom was directly translated with the purpose of being clearly receipted internationally. China has recently put more pressure its partners to make their stances on the Taiwan and the one-China policy official integrated within their foreign ministries. Naturally, the more interdependently loyal nations who are currently taking part in joint military operations with the power, have made clear in published transcripts their offer of official support for the policy principle when prompted by Qin Gang, the director of bi-lateral phone calls in which this diplomatic phenomenon manifests. This effort has been made toward regimes that are not internationally recognised, such as the Taliban Interim regime of Afghanistan, in which the Chinese-released press statement regarding a bilateral phone call between Qin Gang and the Taliban’s acting Foreign Minister emphasised Afghanistan’s commitment to the one-China policy. The global organization of nations aligned with the China camp’s state model and diplomatic philosophy behind a “red line”, as described by Xi himself, is concerning to say the least. This line constrains China’s allies as well: China does not allow countries with which it has diplomatic relations to maintain official ties with

Taiwan. Over several years, several countries have cut their formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan to re-establish them in Beijing. Taipei faced its most recent loss of a diplomatic ally just this week, as Honduran President Xiomara Castro instructed her Foreign Ministry to open official relations with China. If Honduras follows through with the termination of formal bi-lateral relations, it will leave Taiwan with only thirteen diplomatic allies. This can be noted from a broader perspective as a choice between China and the United States, rather than China and Taiwan, as the decision has in effect appealed to China rather than Honduras’s top-trade partner, the U.S.

## **7. Unconventional military expansionism**

Though NATO’s primary region of concern with respect to Chinese military expansionism is in the naval hegemony of the Indo-Pacific, yet the narrative of GDI means to achieve GSI ends is not yet explicit in China’s port activity. Although there have been a handful of instances in which China’s military ships have docked in commercially-leased ports of its partner countries, PLA naval mobilisation has been kept low-key outside of its only foreign military base in Djibouti. Rather, it is the process by which the military base was acquired that is of concern for economically interdependent Sino-partners. The economic debt-trapping methodology to meet Chinese national security ends is, in fact, most explicit across the land of its neighbouring countries in Central Asia. Unofficial Chinese military expansion has been proliferating in the

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

area over the past 5 years, extending militant arms to neighbouring Pakistan and Afghanistan to protect the grand investments in which these neighbouring economies are dependent on. Considering the phenomenon is most prevalent in Central Asia, at a geographic distance, should this be of particular concern to NATO? Can NATO expect the PLA to engage military expansion in the Indo-Pacific using the same methodology? As NATO expects, the range of China's economic warfare extends further than NATO's missile defense system. This is supported by the general shift in power:

*... technology-driven shift... away from states to international/multilateral organizations and transnational non-state actors ...*<sup>14</sup>

NATO cites this shift as a source for unfamiliar complexity within the statecraft of policy towards China's enhanced global assertiveness. China's embrace of this trending shift in power, backed by its joint provision of GDI and GSI frameworks, will manifest as:

*companies in civilian space will have to care about their own security architecture*<sup>15</sup>

Over the past two decades, China has accrued more ships than America's navy has in total; however, where they are located and the operations they are engaged in are widely unknown. NATO expects China to capitalise on power

trends allowing for discharge of economic militarism within the Indo-Pacific specifically, as it keeps its eye on the ever-developing geopolitics of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China's recent security cooperation with the Solomon Islands. The China-Solomon Islands Security Pact should be understood as the South China Sea demo version of the methodology that has been practiced in its land and maritime Indo-Pacific backyard for years, sparking a new level of anxiety in the US, and therefore NATO. The practice of this methodology was first evident in China's only officially established foreign PLA outpost, in Djibouti.

#### *7.1 Djibouti Military Base*

The US has maintained military bases in a least forty-five countries, similar to Britain, France, and even small Singapore operates training camps abroad. The CCP has had time to refine and develop coercive methods of military expansion under the front it has maintained that Djibouti is its only bastion abroad. Though the question of whether debt-trapping and land-grabbing tactics were deliberately used for leverage by China in its negotiation with Djibouti has been exhausted, as a lack of transparency implies lack of evidence to build an argumentative narrative. Though, Djibouti and other Indo-Pacific states may claim the contrary, as China had invested the equivalent of 75 percent of Djibouti's GDP into its infrastructure, raising its public external debt from 50 to 85 percent of its GDP, before buying out their land for a military base to engage in

---

<sup>14</sup> NATO 2022 Strategic Concept

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

multilateral anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. More relevantly, the resulting contract which granted China land-leasing rights in the port city is a powerful representation of “economic militarism”, regarding the intention of using military power projection to expand or safeguard access to investment and economies opportunities abroad. Economic militarism’s application in the Indo-Pacific, developed over the past two decades and commonly known as the “String of Pearls” theory, of which refers to a string of Chinese-acquired commercial ports with potential use for military purposes. China’s critical “pearls” include:

#### **Djibouti Naval Military Base**

The PRC acquired a 10-year lease with Djibouti **national debt** to China totalling **70% of its GDP** at the time<sup>16</sup>

#### **Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka**

China Merchants Port Holdings (CMPort) acquired 99-year lease and 70% stake with Sri Lankan **national debt** to China totalling **95% of its GDP** at the time<sup>17</sup>

#### **Gwadar Port in Pakistan**

China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC) acquired 91% stake with **debt** to China totalling **90% of its GDP** at the time<sup>18</sup>

NATO’s unclassified Regional Perspectives Report on the Indo-Pacific proves awareness of the potential for unconventional manifestations of geopolitical-economic conflict along these exact borders, as Art 1.2 point 21 cites:

*Before the Russia-Ukraine war dominated the global agenda, some other clashes between major powers in the Middle East and in South Asia took places in 2019/2020 ... US Armed Clashes also escalated between two nuclear-armed states, India and Pakistan, over Kashmir and the India-China border clashes along the actual Line of Actual Control.<sup>19</sup>*

The article then highlights the significance of these developments as indicative of how Chinese influence will be leveraged for political gain in the Indo-China region, implying a shift in regional alignment to adapt to the enhanced competitiveness within the geopolitical landscape. NATO claims:

*China uses economic and financial incentives, technology and infrastructure projects, and most recently military cooperation to expand its influence within and beyond the Indo-Pacific region... China’s acquisition of the Sri Lanka port... and China-Solomon security cooperation have increased concerns for the future expansion of China’s influence<sup>20</sup>*

---

<sup>16</sup> *The Economic Times*, 2021

<sup>17</sup> *Financial Times*, 2017

<sup>18</sup> *CSIS*, 2018

<sup>19</sup> NATO 2022 Strategic Concept

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*

NATO has caught on to the picture of “pearls” painted by Chinese “encirclement” strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Though a bit late, its “360-degree approach to security”, based upon establishing greater outreach with global partners, is a reasonable geostrategic response, as it draws a bigger circle. This paper puts special emphasis on one particular land-based region to be concerned in complement to the Indo-Pacific, marked parallel with a red X on the newly evolved game-plan of power politics and bloc confrontation: The South-Asian region occupied by the CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor)

### *7.2 PLA x Pakistan*

Gwadar Port is the typical asset of contention referred to in discourse on China’s double handed-investments, yet recent conflict along Pakistan’s land-based economic corridors has become a point of interest in terms of economic militarism and PLA expansion. Threats by terrorist organizations specifically targeting the CPEC project have created a high-risk setting, toward Chinese investments and national security. A myriad of extremist groups have long used economic terror strategy, as recently observed by recent Afghanistan-Pakistan border tension at the Torkham border crossing: After days had passed in which the highway shut Downey the Afghan government, with truckers stalled throughout, gunfire broke out amid Pakistan’s subsequent shut down of the crossing having accusing the Taliban of sheltering terrorists from the outlawed group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also referred to as the Pakistan Taliban, a Taliban-allied rebel group causing a recent spike in violent extremism across

Pakistan though having commit acts of terror for over a decade.

The historical significance of the Khyber Pass intra-regional conflict at the still existent, contested border crossings, dating back hundreds of years, prevails within the contemporary security landscape: Clashes on the border have been prevalent over the two decade rule of the US-backed Afghan government and have increased since the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021. Outbreaks of conflict between Afghan and Pakistani security forces, as well as groups such as the (TTP) have caused the subsequent shut down of primary border crossings between the two nations, yet one border partner has been persistent amid terror threats in pursuit of its economic opportunities.

One would think an entire history’s worth of security instability would carry more weight in the investment risk-analysis of Chinese SOE’s, yet rather it is used to justify mobilisation of security forces to pursue national interest.

PLA presence within Pakistan-occupied Kashmir first spread across a myriad of Indian news media sources around 6 years ago. The PLA was allegedly first spotted within Pakistan’s borders toward the end of 2017 at forward posts along the Line of Control (LoC) on the Pakistani side of Kashmir. Ever since, neighbouring countries, India especially, has been made aware of their presence of which has concentrated in posts opposite of Nowgam sector in North Kashmir and is thought to have created supporting infrastructure, according to Indian Army officials’

reference to intercepts of Pakistani army officers. PLA has been witnessed opposite of Indian Tangdhar sector as well, as SOE China Gezhouba Group Company Limited is developing the Jhelum-Neelum 970 MW Hydropower project. The alleged intercepts also informed that the PLA would be digging tunnels in Leepa Valley of PoK to facilitate an all-weather road reaching Karakoram Highway. Whether these claims have basis is up to debate, though the narrative is clear regardless of its fabrication by the Indian government or a real Chinese infringement on territorial integrity of its neighbours. As the Chinese Army maintains complete silence on the topic, the undetermined foreign presence has been largely operating under the umbrella of Beijing's 46 billion dollar CPEC development initiative in the region. A project accruing excessive geo-strategic importance recently, as China puts more pressure on Pakistan to accept PLA mobilisation amid security threats and the extension of the corridor further into neighbouring, and newly accommodating Afghanistan.

### *7.3 PLA x Afghanistan*

Chinese resilience has remained especially strong amid security threats from the extremist backlash from its deeply integrated commercial presence in the fragile nation of Afghanistan. Threats of magnitude, such as the December 12 ISIS attack on a Chinese-worker occupied hotel of last year, have been largely disregarded in terms of development initiatives. The Islamic State has formally declared jihad against the CCP, whilst simultaneously accusing it of:

*preparing for a global military campaign*

*offering, lucrative loan schemes for the developing countries*

*establishing a Neo-Chinese colony<sup>21</sup>*

Terror groups' perspectives stretch the narrative of Chinese economic coercion to an extreme, claiming that:

*prior to invasion, [colonizers] ensured their global reach through commercial companies who served their interests for gathering intels and preparing ground for future invasion<sup>22</sup>*

Though NATO's analyses of Sino-affairs have lacked such a strong presumption of imminent invasion, the narrative is quite similar and accepted in more cross-cutting ways than imaginable. Though China has a long history of economic cooperation with Afghanistan, even cooperating with NATO in the region in terms of investments and development, the prospect of PLA troops has only been relevant as recent as Xi's new shift in security strategy. 2018 reports suggest China's interest in establishing a fully funded military base in Badakhshan, Afghanistan, including lethal and nonlethal weaponry. General Dawlat Waziri of the Ministry of Defense of Afghanistan cited the agreement to have been reached in 2017 in Beijing between Afghan Minister of Defense Tariq Shah Bahrami and Vice Chairman of Central Military Commission Xu Qiliang

---

<sup>21</sup> Voice of Khorasan, Issue 13

<sup>22</sup> Ibid



during the first-ever trilateral ministerial meeting of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The basis for PLA occupation is plausible, as China has primary national interest in the control and securitization of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and their associated threats of terror coming from the East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a militant Uighur separatist group within Afghanistan's borders. In its assumption of the development responsibility the US and NATO left behind, China also continues the fight against Islamic extremism, though as an extension of its own domestic initiative to eliminate Muslim radicalisation. China, as provided by its diplomatic philosophy, is tolerant to the cultures and internal affairs of other countries, setting aside subjective perceptions of human rights and democracy of which impede bi-lateral economic and political cooperation. Thus, China is respectful of Sharia Law and its cultural foundation, so long that it does not have influence in China, allowing China to act in a completely opposing way toward its domestic muslims. Afghan citizens are increasingly aware of this, and the human rights violations committed against their "brothers" have been used to rally an opposition to Chinese integration within Afghanistan. The question is whether this imminent security threat will be enough to stall Chinese development, or, will it trigger a more established PLA presence within the country and its related corridors of India-Pacific connectivity.

## **8. Discussion and recommendations**

PLA expansion has been characterised by the countering of unconventional threats to security, such as terror from non-state actors targeting sectors and assets unrelated to hard power elements of conventional security.

NATO's conceptual strategy has adjusted accordingly, as the 2022 Strategy Concept expands the organization's scope of sectoral engagement and actor cooperation, evident in official provisions for space and cyber security initiatives via enhanced security integration with Indo-Pacific partners; however, these concepts must be realised within the systemic framework of the organisation. The European port-centric anxiety fuelled by tense economic interdependence with China should be addressed by economic-framed mechanisms, appropriate for countering the commercial nature of Chinese security strategy. Such a policy should target the intermingled approach of GSI and GDI implementation, specifically the premise of mobilising security forces to protect investments abroad, of which strategically drive operations in areas of conflict. NATO should thus, in a way, shift its perspective to the same Chinese lens of development used to view security operations, seeking development opportunities as prospects for security interest. This approach could be implemented by addressing the security landscape of development sites before coercive, irreversible investment policy is exercised.

NATO needs an investment risk apparatus within its structural security framework: an exclusive branch of consultants and auditors to monitor investments abroad threatening the implementation of NATO mandate.

NATO's framework provides for an independent, external audit body to monitor the organization's own financial performance facilitated by the NATO Investment Security Programme (NSIP).

## **9. NATO investment security risk assessment apparatus**

This paper proposes the assembly of an integrated, internal audit body to consult and provide for risk assessments of financial movements abroad that pose a threat to NATO's mandate. NATO security standards should be officially established for investment landscapes: providing specific security criteria to be met before exceeding specific degrees of foreign investment and development integration. The branch should provide for security briefing of projects of concern, dynamically targeting audiences: to influence the domestic policy of Chinese interdependent nations in defense of their national economic security, as well as, to spread awareness to NATO members and partners in order to shape a cohesive perspective of economic militarism's role in an increasingly competitive geopolitical landscape.

## Bibliography

- Amako, S. (2014). China's diplomatic philosophy and view of the International Order in the 21st century. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 3(2), 3-33  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2014.11869073>
- Basit, A, & Pantucci, R. (2021, August 27). Why terrorists will target China in Pakistan. *Foreign Policy*.  
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/27/why-terrorists-will-target-china-in-pakistan/>
- Feng, W. (2023, January 13). The theoretical foundation of the global security initiative-the holistic view of national security.  
Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).  
<https://interpretcsis.org/translations/the-theoretical-foundation-of-the-global-security-initiative-the-holistic-view-of-national-security/>
- Foreign minister Qin Gang meets the press. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China. (2023, March 7).  
[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/wjbz\\_663308/2461.663310/202303/t20230307\\_11037190.htm](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461.663310/202303/t20230307_11037190.htm)
- International Board of Auditors for NATO (IBAN). NATO. (2022, October 27).  
[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_55937.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_55937.htm)
- NATO 2022 Strategic Concept (2022, June 29).  
[https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/06/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/06/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf)
- Rajagopalan, R. P. (2022, May 7). China's XI proposes global security initiative. *The Diplomat*.  
<https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/chinas-xi-proposes-global-security-initiative/>
- Reuters. (2018, January 25). China denies plan to build military base in Afghanistan. Reuters.  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-afghanistan-idGUSKBNIFE196>
- The global security initiative concept paper. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2023, February 21).  
[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221\\_11028348.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221_11028348.html)
- The Economist Newspaper. (2022, May 7). How the west should respond to China's search for foreign outposts. *The Economist*  
<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/05/07/how-the-west-should-respond-to-chinas-search-for-foreign-outposts>

TOL (2016, March 13). Chinese army spotted along line of control in' Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The Times of India.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/chinese-army-spotted-along-line-of-control-in-pakistan-occupied-kashmir-say-sources/articleshow/51380359.cms>

Zhao Lijion's Regular Press Conference on June 30, 2022, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/52510\\_6654017281.665403/202206/12032063010713185.htm](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/52510_6654017281.665403/202206/12032063010713185.htm)

Toktomushev, K. (2018, January 18). China's military base in Afghanistan. The Diplomat.

<https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/chinas-military-base-in-afghanistan/>

Wang, Y. (2022, September 21). Jointly Advancing the Global Development Initiative and Writing a New Chapter for

Common Development. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China.

[https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202209/t20220922\\_10769721.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202209/t20220922_10769721.html)

Xi, Jinping. (2022, April 21). Keynote Speech at the 2022 Boao

Forum: Rising to challenges and building a bright future through cooperation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China.

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/202204/t20220421\\_10671081.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/202204/t20220421_10671081.html)

Zhao, L (2022, June 30). Foreign Ministry Spokesperson